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ABSTRACT

This study examined the function of role models in young, religious women's construction of religious identity, exploring the meaning and relevance of religious role modeling to teenagers and their teachers in a Jerusalem girls' high school. Students and teachers completed interviews. Students were asked whether girls in religious high schools perceived their teachers as models for life or sources of information; whether they sought role models and where they found them; whether teacher gender affected their ability to perceive them as role models; and how they perceived teachers as religious figures and the impact of gender on doing so. Teachers were asked whether they were conscious of their function as religious models; how they presented themselves as religious models; types of religious models they presented; whether they perceived their students as searching for religious models; and whether their efforts at modeling were successful. Students had a self-expressed need for religious direction as the product of an educational system that did not hide complexity. Students and teachers alike probed the implications of exposing students to multiple voices of authority and stressed a need to balance students' long-range educational goals and immediate conflicts and concerns. The school had a dearth of role models and a confusing overabundance of religious figures whose messages often conflicted. (Contains 21 references.) (SM)

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En-Gendering Identities: Accounting for Gender in Religious Educational Role Modeling

by Rachel Furst

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by Rachel Furst

Project Mentor: Professor Susan Handelman

ATID Fellows

2001–02

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Project Description

In the field of general education, research suggests that female teachers are often the most effective mentors for their female students. How does this phenomenon translate to religious education in a community that promotes distinct gender roles in ritual and spiritual life? Would the ideal girls' high school employ an exclusively female *limmudei kodesh* faculty? In order to explore this question, it is necessary to define the function of role modeling in education. Of what relevance is a teacher's character, worldview, lifestyle, gender, etc. to her effectiveness as an educator? This question is sharpened in the realm of religious education. Assuming that we expect religious studies teachers to impart religious values in addition to (and perhaps unrelated to) the material they were hired to teach, how, in practice, do we anticipate that they will fulfill this mission? Most importantly, what part do role models play in adolescents' construction of religious identity? This project explores the theoretical underpinnings of these and related issues and presents a case study of the Pelech School in Jerusalem for purposes of analysis.

Abstract

The goal of this project is to highlight the function of role models or mentors in young, religious women's construction of religious identity. Are high school students looking for models of the religious personalities they aspire to become? What sort of guidance and/or models are they seeking? Where are they looking for these models, and where are they finding them? Are these models significant to their religious development, and, if so, how? The study presented herein is an attempt to identify and explore the meaning and relevance of religious role modeling to teenage students and their teachers in a Jerusalem-based high school for girls.

The project itself is divided into three parts: (1) a theoretical section, which reviews the related literature in the field of general education and explores the function of role modeling in religious education; (2) a presentation of the author's

own research, i.e., a case study built upon interviews with students and teachers at the Pelech School, along with an analysis of some themes that emerged; and (3) a prescriptive section, in which the author provides recommendations on the basis of the Pelech model.

The goal of this project is to provide an in-depth and (hopefully) insightful analysis of an educational issue of contemporary relevance. It is the author's acknowledged belief, from the outset, that role models are critical to religious development and that the availability and accessibility of religious models significantly impacts the formation of students' religious personalities.

The Pelech School was a natural choice of subject for a study on gender and religious education. Pelech is a unique institution in many ways, and most significantly for the project in question, it is a school that is aware of both the educational importance of role modeling and the impact of gender on identity formation. This awareness does not make Pelech a typical religious, girls' high school, but it does make it a fruitful and thought-provoking case study. The author hopes that although it may not be statistically representative, either of the Orthodox world or even of Pelech itself, this case study will at least raise relevant questions and serve as a catalyst for further research. Using the portraiture method developed by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot, the author presents her research in this section as a narrative "portrait" that provides a particular glimpse into the educational world of students and teachers at one high school.

The purpose of interviews with students was to find out whether students are conscious and desirous of the function that role models play in their construction of religious identity and whether that function is being fulfilled by their teachers. The questions posed in the student interviews aimed to glean a sense of: (1) do girls in

religious high schools perceive their teachers as models for life or as sources of information; (2) are they looking for role models at all, and if so, where are they are finding those models; (3) does the gender of their teachers affect students' ability to perceive them as role models; and (4) do they perceive their teachers as religious figures, and does gender impact their ability to do so?

In interviewing teachers, the goal was: (1) to determine whether teachers are conscious of their function as religious models; (2) to find out how teachers present themselves as religious models (through conversations with students, bringing students to their homes, etc.); (3) to record the types of religious models that teachers are presenting; (4) to ascertain whether these teachers perceive their students as searching for religious models; and (5) to pinpoint how teachers determine whether their efforts at religious modeling are successful, and whether students are receptive, satisfied, and so forth.

These questions could easily be asked of male educators teaching male students (and perhaps should be), but since the focus of the current study was relationships between female educators and their female students, the author asked interviewees to be conscious of the gender factor and to give expression to their sensitivities as female teachers in particular. Do female teachers perceive themselves as filling a modeling function (for their female students) that their male colleagues cannot? How do they define that function, and how do they respond to that need? Do they sense that their students are sensitive to gender issues as well?

The overarching theme that emerged from all of the conversations was students' self-expressed need for religious direction as the products of an educational system that does not hide complexity. Students and teachers alike probed the implications of exposing students to multiple voices of authority and stressed a need

for balance between long-range educational goals and addressing students' immediate conflicts and concerns. Pelech emerged as school that has, rather than a dearth of role models, a confusing overabundance of religious figures whose broadcasted messages often conflict.

In the prescriptive part of the essay, the author recommends ways in which the structure of girls' high schools might be adjusted to place greater emphasis on religious modeling and to achieve greater measures of success.

Foreword

"Describe the person who has had the most significant impact on your religious development," the application instructed. A senior in high school, I had written personal statements and college essays on everything from the thrills of scholastic journalism to Dr. Seuss. But this one posed a problem. Though I craved a spiritual mentor, there was no one person whom I could cite as my religious role model.

Throughout high school, I had bemoaned the lack of a religious personality in my life. Observing the special relationship my male classmates had with their *gemara* teacher, who lived in the neighborhood and held weekly *Shabbat*-afternoon gatherings in his home, along with Friday night *tisches* and personal *schmoozes*, I lobbied the school administration for a parallel experience for the female members of our class. But when the few male teachers that the school proposed failed to generate an enthusiastic following among the high school girls, I concluded that the issue was one of gender. If only we had charismatic, female, Torah teachers, I lamented.

The school did respond to some degree and, in the years following my graduation, hired a handful of additional women to teach *limmudei kodesh*; but I never found the role model I was seeking. In the end, I wrote my essay on the biblical Devorah *Ha-Neviah*, the female, religious personality I wished I could have known.

My ATID project this year has been a highly personal endeavor, inspired and fueled by an ongoing, individual quest for religious role models. As my peers and I make educational and professional decisions that will affect the direction and focus of our own careers as educators, I wanted to find out how important religious role modeling was to contemporary adolescent girls. Do current high school students feel

the same need for mentoring that I did? Do they experience the same lack of available candidates?

In fact, the outer trappings of students' high school experiences at the school I chose to study—the Pelech School in Jerualem—appeared to be very different than the high school experience I had, specifically with regard to religious role modeling. At Pelech, there is no dearth of female, religious personalities to serve as role models. The selection is not only abundant, it is fairly varied, within the range of the Israeli, Modern Orthodox, religious consensus. Nonetheless, in listening to Pelech students and alumnae, I found that they too grappled with a perceived lack of guidance. Although their confusion stemmed from over-stimulation and not from the absence of inspirational figures, and although they were far more aware of the conflict between autonomy and authority than I was during adolescence, their search for religious direction sounded remarkably similar to my own. This project, then, only confirmed my prior beliefs in the critical function that role models play in adolescent girls' development and construction of religious identity.

When I chose the topic for my ATID project this year, I didn't think that it was related, in any way, to the project that I worked on during my first year as an ATID fellow which examined the possibility of integrating traditional, *yeshivah*-style learning with an academic approach to religious studies. However, as I sat down to write up the results of this study and reflected a bit on my last two years in ATID, it occurred to me that there was, in fact, an important connection. The two projects I had undertaken were devoted to the two cornerstones of religious experience. Last year, I addressed the effect of textual learning on religious development and the "relevance" of Torah. This year, I explored how religious development and the "relevance" of Torah are affected by the human encounter.

Introduction

The goal of this project is to highlight the function of role models or mentors in young, religious women's construction of religious identity. Are high school students looking for models of the religious personalities they aspire to become? What sort of guidance and/or models are they seeking? Where are they looking for these models, and where are they finding them? Are these models significant to their religious development, and, if so, how? The study presented herein is an attempt to identify and explore the meaning and relevance of religious role modeling to teenage students and their teachers in a Jerusalem-based high school for girls.

In the field of general education, research suggests that female teachers are often the most effective mentors for their female students. How does this phenomenon translate to religious education in a community that promotes distinct gender roles in ritual and spiritual life? Would the ideal girls' high school employ an exclusively female *limmudei kodesh* faculty (in line with the typical boys' high school, in which the religious studies faculty is exclusively male)?[1] Currently, such a model has not been adopted by Modern Orthodox girls' high schools—but that reality may be linked to a temporary problem of implementation. Were sufficient numbers of well-trained, qualified female teachers of *gemara*, *halakhah*, and *TaNaKH* to become available, such that teacher quality was an issue entirely unrelated to gender, would we want our ideal girls' high school to replace its male faculty members with women?

In order to explore these questions, it was necessary for me to define the function of role modeling in education. Of what relevance is a teacher's character, worldview, lifestyle, gender, and so forth to her effectiveness as an educator? This

[1] Religious boys' high schools cite a variety of reasons for limiting their religious studies faculty to men, including issues of modesty and teacher availability (for subjects such as Talmud), in addition to role modeling. Gender questions regarding boys' education are worthy of an entirely separate study.

question is sharpened in the realm of religious education. Do we expect religious studies teachers to impart religious values in addition to (and perhaps unrelated to) the material they were hired to teach, and, if so, how do we anticipate that they will fulfill this mission? Teachers and administrators are often hired on the basis of their person (character, education, worldview, lifestyle), independent of their skills as teachers and administrators, because they conform to a model that the school wishes to promote to its student body. How effective is this type of "modeling" education?

The definition of "role model" that I will employ throughout this essay is threefold: (1) an educator who is identified as being a model for life, rather than (or, in addition to) as a conveyor of information; (2) a personality in whom the other can perceive herself, both at present and in the future; (3) an exemplar of the type of the life the other wants, or hopes, to lead.

Does the gender of the teacher affect her ability to function as a role model of this sort for her students? My hypothesis is, yes. A male teacher/role model may be astoundingly successful at presenting his female students with a model of character, worldview, and lifestyle that they will be inspired to emulate; however, when it comes to implementation, they will find that they cannot replicate the "ideal" religious personality with which they were presented, by the very fact of their gender. A male *gemara* teacher may inspire his female student to pursue her own advanced learning; but the educational frameworks and master teachers that were available to him will not be available to her. A male *halakhah* teacher may motivate his female student to pursue a life committed to meaningful halakhic observance; but the *mitzvot* that are central to his definition of ritual observance will not be applicable to her. Therefore, an additional question that needs to be addressed is: what religious model are we

promoting for our female students? How central are gender and gender roles to their religious education?

Background

Most of the educational studies that informed and directed my own research focus on relationships between mentors and protégés and the way that gender (of mentor and protégé) can play a role in that type of relationship. Mentor-protégé studies are not a perfect match for my topic, teachers and role modeling, because: (1) they tend to focus on students at the university level and/or entry-level professionals as opposed to adolescents; and (2) they focus on a relationship that is pre-defined and self-conscious as opposed to one that may or may not develop as a side-effect of prolonged exposure in a different context (the classroom). Nonetheless, some of these studies were helpful in framing my own questions and hypotheses.

Mentoring is generally defined as "a powerful emotional interaction between an older and younger person, a relationship in which the older member is trusted, loving, and experienced in the guidance of the younger." Additionally, mentoring has been described as "synthesiz[ing] characteristics of the parent-child relationship and peer support without being either."[2] However, it is also acknowledged that mentoring means different things in different contexts (for example, academic vs. business) and that studies have often failed to define their subject in precise terms.[3]

In their discussion of gender and mentoring in academic settings, Olson and Ashton-Jones (1992) focus on the significance of mentoring for women in academia in light of the traditionally patriarchal, female-exclusive structure of the academy.

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[2] Sharan Merriam, "Mentors and Protégés: A Critical Review of the Literature," *Adult Education Quarterly* 33/3 (Spring 1983): 162.

[3] Merriam, 169. With regard to the field of education, she notes: "In education, a mentor is friend, guide, counselor, but above all, a teacher. As yet, studies from educational settings reveal no clear notion of how a mentor is different from an influential teacher, and, if they can be differentiated, how pervasive mentoring actually is in this setting."

They point out that mentoring itself has been traditionally conceived as a male-male relationship: in the mythic mentoring relationship portrayed by Homer, Mentor, a man, is charged with responsibility for Telemachus, Odysseus' male progeny. Olson and Aston-Jones note that women are often at a disadvantage in finding appropriate mentors, as many male professors hesitate to take on female protégées and potential female mentors are only beginning to enter the upper echelons of the academy. In addition, aspiring academic women are perceived as "doubly deviant," which increases the significance of mentoring.[4] Relating this discussion to teachers and role modeling raises a number of questions. Does our religious tradition provide any models for female *rebbe-talmid* relationships? If so, does that have any practical implication? Are women who go into *hinukh* or advanced learning affected by the number of available female mentors? Do women feel "doubly-deviant" in the Jewish religion? If so, how does this affect their relationships with teachers and/or role models?

Campbell and Campbell (1997) conclude that gender may have one effect on mentor-protégé relationships in the realm of *attitudes and preferences* and a different effect in the realm of *objective and behavioral* measures. That is, protégés reflecting on the success of their mentor relationships express greater satisfaction when the mentor is of their same gender, but do not necessarily demonstrate greater success by objective standards (test scores, dropout rate, salary attained, rate of promotion).[5] Translating this finding into my study on teacher role-modeling and gender, the question that it raises is: even if female teachers form stronger personal bonds with

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[4] Gary A. Olson and Evelyn Ashton-Jones, "*Doing* Gender: (En)gendering Academic Mentoring," *Journal of Education* 174/3 (1992): 119. Aspiring academic women are double deviants in that "being born female in a patriarchal society already makes her a deviant, but 'aspiring to the attributes and privileges of the dominant class,' in this case the male-inscribed university, makes her doubly so."

[5] Toni A. Campbell and David E. Campbell, "Evaluation of Mentoring Experiences," *Research in Higher Education* 38/6 (December 1997): 740.

their female students, does that relationship/role modeling positively affect behavioral practice, i.e. *kiyyum mitzvot*, continued learning, and so forth? Is the formation of a relationship with a religious role model in itself a "practical" goal?

In her studies of Religious-Zionist adolescent girls in Israel (conducted in a specific *ulpanah* in the late 1980s), Tamar Rapoport addresses a number of questions relevant to my study, namely, what are the significant factors in these girls' construction of religious identity? Rapoport does not focus on role-modeling in her first two studies, although she does mention it as an element in the school's program to shape students' religious identities.[6] She cites "fleeting" mentoring, by which she means interaction with visiting lecturers and limited exposure to dynamic personalities, as an experience that is not significant in and of itself, but does function as a trigger for religious fortification. The students in her study related to mentors primarily in this manner. In her third study, Rapoport deconstructs one particular course in the religious curriculum of an *ulpanah* to determine its function in the construction of students' religious identities. In this study, she does focus on the function of the teacher as religious model, specifically how the teacher presents herself as a religious model in the context of a particular course, in method as well as in content.[7] These studies were helpful in that they dealt with the same population as my study, and analyzed the phenomena unique to this population in sociological terms.

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[6] Tamar Rapoport, *et al*, "Religious Socialization and Female Subjectivity: Religious-Zionist Adolescent Girls in Israel," *Sociology of Education* 68/1 (January 1995): 48–61 and Tamar Rapoport and Yoni Garb, "The Experience of Religious Fortification: The Coming of Age of Religious-Zionist Young Women," *Gender and Education* 10/1 (March 1998): 5–20.

[7] Tamar Rapoport, "The Pedagogical Construction of the Traditional Woman in the Modern Era: An Ethnographic Study of a 'Holiness Class'" [Hebrew], *Megamot* 39/4 (1999): 492–517.

Carol Gilligan's now-classic studies on women and psychological development—*In a Different Voice*[8] and *Making Connections*[9]—were critical to the development of my project, both in content and form. In *A Different Voice*, Gilligan challenges the widely-accepted models of moral development attributed to Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg and demonstrates that the "standard" paradigm does not accurately reflect the female experience. She proposes that women perceive morality and relate to the world on the basis of relationship and connection (rather than on the basis of objective and hierarchical schemas). In *Making Connections*, Gilligan deals specifically with girls in high school, which was helpful to me in establishing psychological and developmental themes relevant to my study's focus population.

In the twenty years since Gilligan's work was initially published, her studies have come under intense critique, due in large measure to her research method. Susan Faludi, for example, points out that Gilligan's studies are based on a very narrow, non-representative slice of the population, that her conclusions draw extreme generalizations, and that in basing her findings on interviews, she does not "make allowances for the difference between what people *say* about their own moral behavior and how they really act."[10] It is important to note that Gilligan's studies are not universally accepted, nor is her methodology without flaw. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this project, I have chosen to adopt Gilligan's narrative style and heavy reliance on interviews. Although Gilligan's case studies, which were based on Harvard College students and a group of women seeking abortions in a particular urban center, may not be representative of the broader American public, they

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[8] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
[9] Carol Gilligan, *et al*, ed., *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
[10] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991): 330.

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nonetheless serve as triggers for serious consideration and questioning of widely-held assumptions. I can only hope that my study of students and teachers at the Pelech School in Jerusalem will do the same.

Research Methodology

This project has gone through several incarnations and attained its final form only in the last few months of work. Initially, I intended to limit my study to administrators and educators who had ideas about educational role modeling and the impact of gender on teacher-student relationships and were in a position to implement their visions. For comparative purposes, I wanted to consider questions of role modeling and gender not only in the context of Modern Orthodox high schools (both Israeli and American) and *midrashot* for girls, but also in the context of *haredi* institutions and of boys' high schools and *yeshivot*. In actuality, I got as far as interviewing recent graduates of Israeli high schools for girls, in the hope that they would provide direction for the interviews with teachers and administrators.[11]

One theme that emerged from the student interviews was that *few female high school students look to their teachers (male or female) as religious figures/models*. They are more likely to cite their parents as religious figures, or to point to Bnei Akiva *madrikhot* as role models. A number of student interviewees said that they did not look to their teachers for religious models because it wasn't within their own personalities to relate to other people in that manner. However, most students said that there simply wasn't anyone in their high schools who filled that capacity, and so, by default, they looked elsewhere. Those students who attended post-high school *midrashot* indicated that they were more likely both to look for and to find teachers

[11] This initial group of interviewees included approximately twenty graduates of Israeli *ulpanot*, *Kibbutz Ha-Dati* schools, and other religious high schools. Many of the interviewees were enrolled in one of the learning programs at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem, and a number of them were B.A. students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

who could serve as role models in the *midrashah* than in high school. These responses raised the larger question as to whether high school students are seeking role models at all, or whether they are consciously involved in constructing religious identities. I noted that since my interview population was confined to post-high school students, this observation may also point to a methodological weakness: people are apt to interpret their own past experiences in light of more recent experiences. I began to realize that the questions I wanted to address were very dependent on student voices and that I would not be able to find the answers I was looking for by focusing on administrators and visionaries alone.

Then I began to interview teachers. The first teachers that I spoke to were employed by Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem. They provided much insight and refocused many of my questions but did not necessarily correspond to the students I had interviewed: most of these teachers taught overseas students, whereas all of my student interviewees had been Israeli. As I considered expanding both student and teacher interviewee populations, I realized that serious time constraints would prevent me from interviewing a representative sampling of the religious, or even Religious-Zionist, population in Israel. Feeling insecure about the endeavor, I searched for a way in which to limit the scope of my study so that it remained methodologically sound. I decided that this could be best achieved by presenting my study as a limited model for asking and analyzing specific questions, which could then be replicated in a variety of contexts and situations.

Jerusalem's Pelech School was a natural choice of subject for a study on gender and religious education. Pelech, founded in the mid-1960s as an unconventional, alternative high school for ultra-Orthodox girls, has undergone several, identity transformations in the course of its nearly forty years of existence but

has remained an experimental, unique institution throughout.[12] (The school is currently a four-year, selective and academically rigorous high school for Religious-Zionist, Modern Orthodox girls). Most significantly for the project in question, it is a school that is very aware of both the educational importance of role modeling and the impact of gender on identity formation. I can perceive this in the faculty that the school employs, many of whom are young, Pelech graduates; in the policy issues that arise in the school, including women and *kriat ha-Torah*; and in the ruminations of Pelech students, many of which touch upon issues such as feminism and *halakhah*. This awareness does not make Pelech a typical religious, girls' high school, but it does make it a fruitful and thought-provoking case study. I hope that although it may not be statistically representative, either of the Orthodox world or even of Pelech itself, this case study will at least raise relevant questions and serve as a catalyst for further research.

After reading several studies on women and psychological development which rely heavily on interviews, I decided that my final project would include a significant narrative component, as a means of allowing my subjects to represent themselves, in their own voices.[13] As Steven Cohen, a sociologist who has authored many studies on American Jewry, wrote in the introduction to his recent book, *The Jew Within*:

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[12] For the history of the Pelech School, see former principal Alice Shalvi's article, "'Women's Wisdom Has Built Its Home': A Highly Personal Account of the Pelech Experiment," *Studies in Jewish Education* 7 (1995): 81–97.

[13] Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* and *Making Connections*; Mary Field Belenky, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1986); Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Jill McLean Taylor, *et al.*, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). An alternative means of attempting to answer the questions I posed would have been to conduct a statistical study by surveying current and former students. I was inclined to avoid this type of study, both because I am not qualified to conduct one and because I am skeptical about the conclusiveness of such studies in general. Initially, I was hesitant to conduct interviews because I was unsure of my goals in speaking to students (i.e., what the interviews would contribute to my project) and, more specifically, because I was skeptical of the methodology.

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> Quantitative methods alone cannot grasp the ways in which contemporary American Jews follow and depart from the attitudes, behaviors, and conflicts that they witnessed as children. . . . Interviews ... gave us access to meanings and motivations rarely uncovered through quantitative methods. No less important, they gave each respondent the opportunity to describe his or her Jewish development in some detail, and to do so in his or her own words.[14]

The purpose of my interviews with students was to find out whether students are conscious and desirous of the function that role models play in their construction of religious identity and whether that function is being fulfilled by their teachers. The questions I posed in the student interviews aimed to glean a sense of: (1) do girls in religious high schools perceive their teachers as models for life or as sources of information; (2) are they looking for role models at all, and if so, where are they are finding those models; (3) does the gender of their teachers affect students' ability to perceive them as role models; and (4) do they perceive their teachers as religious figures, and does gender impact their ability to do so?

In interviewing teachers, my goal was: (1) to determine whether teachers are conscious of their function as religious models; (2) to find out how teachers present themselves as religious models (through conversations with students, bringing students to their homes, etc.); (3) to record the types of religious models that teachers are presenting; (4) to ascertain whether these teachers perceive their students as searching for religious models; and (5) to pinpoint how teachers determine whether their efforts at religious modeling are successful, and whether students are receptive, satisfied, and so forth.

These questions could easily be asked of male educators teaching male students (and perhaps should be), but since the focus of the current study was relationships between female educators and their female students, I asked

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[14] Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): 3–4.

interviewees to be conscious of the gender factor and to give expression to their sensitivities as female teachers in particular. Do female teachers perceive themselves as filling a modeling function (for their female students) that their male colleagues cannot? How do they define that function, and how do they respond to that need? Do they sense that their students are sensitive to gender issues as well?

The goal of this project is to provide an in-depth and (hopefully) insightful analysis of an educational issue of contemporary relevance. It is my acknowledged belief that role models are critical to religious development and that the availability and accessibility of religious models significantly impacts the formation of students' religious personalities.

Using the portraiture method developed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, I present my research in this section not as a report on hard facts but rather as a narrative "portrait" that provides a particular glimpse into the educational world of students and teachers at one high school.[15]

[15] Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997).

Pelech is not a dogmatic institution. The school prides itself on an educational philosophy that is contingent on a multiplicity of voices and aims to produce young women who are capable of meeting challenges presented by dual religious and secular worlds. To bring about these goals, the school assembles a faculty that encompasses a range of voices and encourages the teachers to share their personal views with students. Similarly, students are encouraged to question, to analyze, and to debate as a means of forming identity.

So I was not surprised by the many qualifications that accompanied students' responses to the opening questions of my study. *Define the concept of a role model*, I asked current Pelech students and graduates, and *tell me who your role models have been*. Responses to the first half were thoughtful and articulate; responses to the second half were inevitably accompanied by a caveat.[16]

> A figure who has relevance and a certain manner of behavior that is worthy of learning from—not everything, but certain ways of behaving. (*Have you had figures like that in your life?*) In certain areas. There was no one figure that had everything. (*Who were they?*) [They were] everywhere—there are teachers, people in the neighborhood, people my age, people that you meet by way of books, journalism, television.

> A role model. . . I assume that it's something that I see—that someone behaves in a way that I also want to. Meaning, that he behaves in a way that is, in my eyes, worthy and that he pays attention to how other people look at him. There are people who don't care. Meaning, they do what they want at that moment. I think it's someone with a social awareness of his belief and how it is perceived in the eyes of others. And not only belief—also way of life, measures of morality, education . . . (*And have you had figures like that?*) In certain things, absolutely yes. Again—it's hard for me to point to one specific figure who is, for

[16] Interviews with Pelech students, alumnae, and faculty were conducted primarily in Hebrew, although a small number were conducted in English, according to the preference of the interviewees. All quotes are based on either the original English of the interview or my own translation. Quotations are cited more or less verbatim, with minor stylistic editing at my own discretion. An ellipsis with spaces on either side indicates the omission of words from the quotation, whereas three dots connected to the preceding word indicate a pause in the interviewee's response. I am deeply grateful to all of the Pelech student, alumnae, teachers, and principal who agreed to be interviewed for this project.

> me, a role model for everything. But there is no doubt that I see my parents as role models, that I see my brother as a role model, and my teachers, and my [army] officers. And in some of my [army] officers, I didn't see that, and it really bothered me . . . Sometimes in my friends. It doesn't necessarily have to be someone that I see as somehow above me.

Students assimilate Pelech's mission statement to varying degrees, but what makes the strongest impression upon them during their years in the school are the educational messages read between the lines. Shira Breuer, principal of Pelech for the past twelve years, describes the ideal Pelech graduate as a woman with multifaceted loyalties—a woman fully committed to *halakhah*, to society, to furthering her education in both religious and secular fields. She is someone who will establish a religious home and transfer those commitments to her family. When I asked students to describe the school's ideal woman, the descriptions they offered emphasized choice rather than commitment.

> An obscure sort of figure. Everyone chooses for herself, and not everyone chooses the same path.

> It's blurred—the principal projects one thing, the school projects something else. Or maybe it's what the girls project. Which is my individual freedom of expression . . . [For example,] many of the girls will wear pants to work . . . A lot of girls will come out saying, this is what Pelech taught me. Not just that it's pants, but that it's my individual way of being a religious person, it's the way that I project, or express, myself.

> I assume that that's the message of Pelech. That everyone—that there isn't one religious truth and that there isn't one behavioral truth. . .

> [The ideal is] "superwoman"—career, family, personal fulfillment. Everything.

Students told me that these messages were broadcast via programs that school ran, slogans that the school promoted, and recurring discussions that were held in class or in public forums. But they also emphasized that the value of religious choice

and the belief in multiple truths were conveyed simply by the range of role models with whom they were presented. Ainat,[17] who graduated Pelech in 1999, recalled:

> At one point, it troubled us—I don't if it [actually] troubled us, but it was going around, why do some teachers wear head coverings and other teachers don't wear head coverings? So each one of them simply gave us her "*Ani Ma'amin.*" (*You asked them about it?*) Yes. And each one gave her answer. And there are answers which, in my eyes, are more legitimate and less legitimate. But each one had her reasoned-out answer.

Meira, currently a Pelech senior, also noted the multiplicity of voices emanating from the faculty room and the ways in which the school allows, and even encourages, teachers to share their often-contradictory religious views and lifestyles with students. She described a town-hall-style meeting convened to discuss school policy on women's Torah reading.[18] Students had reviewed the relevant halakhic sources in their Jewish Law classes and arrived at the meeting with the understanding that it was halakhically acceptable for women to read from the Torah without reciting the opening and closing blessings that require a quorum of men. Given that background, the function of the school-wide meeting was not to discuss *halakhah* but to set public policy. Arguments on either side were presented by both students and teachers. Meira maintained that the range of faculty voices, i.e. authoritative, religious positions, encouraged by the administration, was confusing.

> Because you hear so many different teachers saying so many different things. . . I think that girls' views have less impact than teachers' [views do] . . . [The meeting is] not run by teachers, it's run by the student council. But teachers can also say whatever they think about

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[17] All names of students and teachers have been changed to preserve anonymity.

[18] One teacher described Pelech's *asefot klaliot*, or general meetings, which are run entirely by students, as the "underpinning of the democratic character of Pelech." Policy issues that are voted on at these school-wide meetings usually require a fifty-one percent majority to pass; however, in the specific case of women's Torah reading, students agreed (by prior vote) to require a two-thirds majority for the measure to pass. This exception to general procedure indicates that students considered the issue of women's Torah reading to be unusually significant. In fact, the measure did not pass, due to the atypical two-thirds requirement (more than fifty-one percent, but less than sixty-six, were in favor). Despite the failure of the vote, there is currently an optional women's Torah reading in Pelech, which takes place in the school on *Rosh Hodesh* mornings, fifteen minutes before the school day officially begins.

> the issue, and I think that sometimes that's very confusing, hearing so many different [voices] . . . You hear the principal saying one thing, and the vice principal saying something else, and the *mehanekhet* saying something else . . . I think that's also something that they're trying—they're trying to create that there. But it's not telling you where to go.

The dominant theme that emerged from my conversations with Pelech students and faculty was the conflict between diffusion and focus. Throughout the interviews I conducted, I heard students and teachers struggling to balance a desire for pluralism with a need for direction. *The problem at Pelech*, they told me, in effect, *is not too few role models—it's too many.*

The Guise and the Goals of Role Modeling

All Pelech students agree that teachers are being presented as religious models, and that as models, they succeed at conveying *some* message, though the exact content of the message is debatable. But how, exactly, does a teacher function as a role model, and how important is that function to her job?

Role modeling, say Pelech teachers, is about pushing out the walls of the classroom. It is about bringing students into the home, addressing their concerns, treating other faculty members with respect—and picking up garbage in the hallway. It is about presenting lifestyle options, raising the glass ceiling, setting high standards—and demonstrating that there are limits to success. It is about being accessible, putting effort into lesson plans, allowing students to question—and occasionally saying no. It is about seeing students as a reflection of yourself and about letting students perceive themselves in you. It is sometimes about maintaining distance. It is about making the transition from being a classroom teacher to being an educator.

Nearly all of the teachers at Pelech take on some form of this role and consider it integral to their success. As I walked into the school building one afternoon and

stood to the side of the entranceway, looking around for the teacher I had arranged to interview, I saw a young woman with a stroller and a baby on her hip engaged in conversation with two students at the bottom of the stairwell. I didn't pay much attention, until, after searching the hallways and the teacher's room and checking with the office, I realized that this was, in fact, the woman I was supposed to meet. We went into an empty room, where the first thing she attended to was the baby's diaper, while explaining that she has a babysitter watch her child in the building during the school day, so that she can spend time with him during breaks. "The girls love him," she assured me, "and the school is very supportive."

I interviewed Yael, who teaches *gemara* to multiple classes, on the couch in her living room, as her eighteen-month-old daughter wandered in and out with picture books and a doll carriage, and her husband conducted work-related conversations in the background. True to the setting, she maintained that role modeling is all about being personal, during school hours and afterwards:

> What a teacher does to be a role model, I think, is brings her own personal life into the classroom. Not just teaches material, but lets the students know who she is and what she's all about. Bringing students to the house to let the students get to see how a person lives, what their house looks like, what their kids are like.

Elisheva, who has been teaching history and Jewish philosophy at Pelech for several years, believes that role modeling is a means of teaching her students lessons for which there are no effective texts. She insists that bringing students to her home is critical to her role as a teacher, with the assumption that to be a successful educator, she needs to foster deep, personal relationships with her students.

> It's very important. Very, very important. Because I don't believe it's possible to create a relationship only in the classroom. Part of knowing me is to come into my home and to see me in action with my children, and to see me together with my husband. Meaning, especially now, when I know that it is very difficult for them—as it is for other girls in our society—that they have a lot of difficulty with

> *shiddukhim*, and with partners, they aren't such big believers in the institution of marriage. And they have deliberations, for example, "How is it possible to be married to someone for more than five years, it's terribly boring. . ." So especially in light of these facts, it is very important to me that they come into a home where there is partnership, and there are children, even at the expense of greater careers. It's all. . . I don't say that. But it's part of the message. That there is a young couple, with three kids . . . And it is clear to them that the children come before any work. I never once said that. But if they are here. . .

She trailed off, telling me all this as we sat in the living room of her home one evening, while her husband put the children to bed. In the course of our conversation, they each traipsed in, one after another, to say goodnight, ask lingering questions, and protest the arrival of bedtime.

Not all Pelech teachers, however, are as open with students about their personal lives, nor do they all assign role modeling a primary rung on their hierarchy of goals. Dana, who recently joined the Pelech faculty, said that students do not generally know her outside of the classroom, although they may have had community interaction with her family members, including a son who is in their Bnei Akiva *shevet*, "so [maybe] they connected me with my family."

> I have no doubt that the girls look at me, maybe check me out, but I don't see it as primary in the course of my work. When I prepare a certain *shiur*, when I think about what to do with them, I think more about doing my work properly. And the issue of the modeling is secondary. Very secondary. Meaning, until you came to speak about it, I didn't raise it to the level of. . . Again, as I said to you before, I am conscious of the fact that they look at me, and they listen to what I say, and that they understood me properly, and all, but I can't tell you that it accompanies me all the time. It's something on the side here, in the background.

She said she also has mixed feelings about school *shabbatonim*, which the school strongly encourages teachers to attend with their families.

> On the one hand, it is right. On the other hand, I feel at these *shabbatot* that I am so busy taking care of the little kids that I don't know what the girls can actually get out of it, exactly what model they see.

Do students appreciate all of the conscious and unconscious modeling that goes on during visits to their teachers' homes, or on school *shabbatonim*? Undoubtedly, many enjoy playing with their teachers' kids, and others are amused at seeing their teachers take on the role of parent. Some are aware of being exposed to homes that are similar to or different from their own, and some are oblivious. Avital, a Pelech graduate who now studies law at the Hebrew University, questioned the effectiveness of this type of role modeling for high school students, but conceded that some of the messages did make it into her subconscious.

> When you are at that age, you don't see certain things, because you're not looking for them. You don't think about your home, about how it will look. Today, let's say, I am in a different situation. When I come to a home, I think, "Okay, and in my home, how will it look?" Because it is more relevant to me today, to my age, to the situation that I'm in currently, than then, when I was in high school. But I think that subconsciously, it is important [in high school], even if then you are not aware of it.

The experiences of Pelech students suggest that adolescent exposure to role modeling may be more significant for long-term personal development than it is for the immediate present. The conflict between speaking to the moment and educating toward the future is an ever-present tension at Pelech, with its lofty educational goals of fostering life-long ideals and commitments. Indeed, Shira Breuer shared with me several educational dilemmas she faces as a principal when confronting policy decisions that comprise a choice between focusing on the present and looking toward the future. In these situations, she told me, she usually resolves the conflict by relying on the educational mantra that dealing with the present is, in itself, preparation for the future. Teachers indicated that they constantly struggle to balance short-term goals with long-term goals, not only in the classroom, but also in their role modeling.

The point of developing beyond-the-classroom relationships, say Pelech teachers, is to provide students with real-life examples of religious lifestyles that are,

or will be, available to them. When I pressed Yael to define exactly what it is that she sees herself modeling, she threw out:

> Well, a lifestyle surrounded by Torah, which I think is somewhat foreign to a lot of the students. You know, like I tell them that I met [my husband] through learning . . . that's how we got married, basically, through being *chevrutot*. They know that that's an important part of my life, learning . . . They'll always eventually ask me how did I learn, and where did I learn. You know, for them it's foreign that someone should sit for five years and just learn. Just to tell them things like that, it opens their eyes to a new concept. It makes them realize what different options are open before them. You know, I don't think that most of my students will do the same thing that I did, but if they'll think twice about going to a *midrashah* to continue their learning, that's already an achievement.

The female teachers at Pelech feel a heightened sense of significance to their mission as educators, just by virtue of being religious women. When I asked Ayalah, a tenth-grade *mehanekhet* ("home-room" teacher)[19], whether it is important for the girls to have specifically female *mehankhot*, she asserted,

> It is very important. It is very important. I'll give an answer that might be a little surprising. Specifically because I am a woman, I am religious, and I teach religious studies, I am able not to deal with my being specifically a woman, religious, and. . . Meaning, it becomes so self-evident, that I don't need to say anything. Because—here I am.

But why is it so important? I pressed. What exactly is the significance to the students?

> Because. . . that's the way it is. [Even] on the basis of sexual discrimination, honestly. Because it is imperative that an adolescent girl will see a religious woman opposite her and will learn from her. And that's it. And there's nothing to be done. That's why I said, on the basis of sexual discrimination. Because in truth, a man is a man. And it doesn't matter how sensitive he is, or lovely he is, or connected he is. . .

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[19] In the Israeli school system, *mehankhim* and *mehankhot* are the primary teachers assigned to each class, who are intended to serve as the first address for student concerns and for school interaction with parents. (In a sense, they function as non-professional counselors, or mini-principals). In Pelech, *mehankhim/ot* may be teachers of either religious or secular subjects. They are assigned an additional hour a week with "their" classes, which is designated the *sha'at hinukh*, or "education hour." During the *sha'at hinukh*, *mehankhim/ot* are free to discuss any issues they think are relevant or pressing to their students, be they of religious character or otherwise.

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So you object to male *mehankhim* in terms of the model that it presents to the girls? I interrupted her. "Yes," she said simply.[20] (Pelech does, in fact, currently employ one male *mehanekh* (in addition to seven female *mehankhot*), who is the primary teacher for one of the school's two twelfth-grade classes).

Leora, who teaches *gemara* and *halakhah*, not surprisingly believes that it is particularly important for high school girls to experience women teaching those subjects and to realize, firsthand, that there are women who are learned and capable in realms traditionally reserved for men. She considers barrier-breaking to be a significant aspect of the role modeling she does, while at the same time she believes that as women, she and her students should set new standards for what it means to be religiously committed people. When reflecting on what drew her to teaching Torah as a career, she noted that her own teachers were men.

> I do think that something that motivated me was that these two or three individuals that I could point to in my development were men. And I think that that actually caused me, and I will assume many of my friends, to experience certain crises along the way, where all of a sudden your role as a woman, as a wife, as a mother, sort of came up against things that this male role model didn't have to deal with, or saw differently. Even beyond the whole wife–mother–woman-in-Judaism dynamic, there's also, I think, a very basic fact that men and women are not the same. And not realizing that when you're developing religiously. . . I mean, I certainly had some type of crisis when the ultimate role model that I had of the, you know, sitting in the *beit midrash* and learning all the time, and doing certain things, fell apart in the face of reality, in the face of all types of realities.
>
> One of the reasons I went into high school teaching was that I thought it was important for girls in high school, maybe even *davka* girls from families who send to Pelech, to realize that it's not all, you know, easy and wonderful, and you can have your cake and eat it too, and you can do whatever you want, and be a mother, and be a wife, and do everything great, you know. I'm not trying—I don't mean to be pessimistic. Let's say, not in a negative way but in a positive way, that there are other types of role models, or other types of ways of being

[20] For purposes of clarification, I would like to stress that my conversation with Ayalah was about male and female *mehankhim/ot* specifically, and not about male and female teachers in general.

> important, or being effective in the community which aren't identical to the way a man [would be].

Orit, who is currently learning in a *midrashah* after completing her army service, conceded that gender has played a role in the way that she relates to teachers, particularly in terms of her ability to perceive them as role models. With respect to her female teachers, she reflected:

> Maybe it's easier for me to see myself in them because they're women. It's harder for me to see myself in [my male] *Ra"M.*[21] It's easier to see the image of the husband I'm looking for in him. But I do that too.

These observations appear to correlate with the findings of Campbell and Campbell (1997) who concluded with regard to the *attitudes and preferences* aspect of mentoring that protégés attribute greater success to their mentor relationships when the mentor is of their same gender. However, according to Campbell and Campbell, these same protégés do not necessarily demonstrate greater success by objective standards.[22] The anecdotal evidence presented by Pelech students and teachers similarly suggests that female identification is an important aspect of religious role modeling but gives no indication that it actually has a critical effect on future religious commitment or performance.

Student Receptivity

Are students looking for role models? Some are and some aren't. In response to whether she had ever had a personal relationship with a teacher, Orit answered unequivocally, yes:

> ...Because I am that type of person—I really see a teacher as an older figure from whom it is possible to gain knowledge. [They are] basically the older figures with whom it's possible to talk, who are not connected by blood, like parents. I really took advantage of that in high school. . . . In general, I am a person who looks a lot at [teachers]—at their spouses, at their children, at their [choice of]

[21] *Ra"M* (*Rosh Metivta*, or *Rav Mehanekh*) is the term commonly used in *yeshivot* and *midrashot* to designate one's primary teacher, usually a teacher of *gemara*.
[22] Campbell and Campbell, "Evaluation of Mentoring Experiences," 740.

> careers—and thinks about what to take for myself. . . . I am very much a person who observes and dissects.

Tamar, in contrast, said that she had never considered a teacher to be a role model—"I don't get into that stuff"—and that in her experience, Pelech's *honkhut* project, in which students are paired with a faculty mentor of their choice for mentoring, had not been successful: "I never really got into it—I didn't have anything to say."[23] Yifat, who also claimed that her *honkhut* experience had been very technical and, by her own evaluation, unsuccessful, suggested that her failure to connect with high school teachers was due to a lack on their part, not hers:

> It seems to me that I was searching, and didn't find. [They were] not warm people, [they were] very alienating. Perhaps we were not of the same mind.

Meira considers that the role modeling she and her classmates experience is at the level of the subconscious, but is nonetheless a feature of their educational experience:

> I don't think that it's necessarily conscious. Like, I don't remember ever feeling, "Okay, I'm going to look for a role model." But, I mean, I'm just thinking of things that I've heard people say. You know, you can hear people say how they respect somebody so much in the school, and how they hope they can do that. I assume that means that that person's a role model for them.

Ayalah maintains that most of her students are searching for role models among their teachers, sometimes too vigilantly for her own comfort.

> It seems to me that it is impossible to avoid them searching, first of all, because many of them are *madrikhot* [in youth groups], and that is very important to the way that they perceive things. They see the way that their *hanikhot*, *hanikhim* respond to them and I think that they apply that also, a little, to relationships between students and teachers. There are clearly students who are very much looking for this closeness, and to be told what to do. This, specifically, is something which I don't particularly like to supply. There is a limit.

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[23] In Pelech's *honkhut* program, faculty mentors meet with students on an individual, monthly basis to discuss issues relevant to the student and her academic progress or personal interests. Additionally, *honkhot* represent their students at bi-annual "reviews," meetings between faculty and administration at which the progress of each student in the school is monitored. They then report back to the students, thereby serving as a link between students and the school administration. For further discussion of the *honkhut* program, see the "Recommendations and Conclusion" section of this paper.

Yoni, the only male *mehanekh* on Pelech's staff,[24] does not feel that his teenage students are actively seeking models, although he concedes that they do pick up on the many elements that the teacher may, in fact, be modeling. "They're not searching, not consciously. But to decide that you don't want to be a certain way is also a type of imitation."

Yael maintains that although some students may be uninterested in developing any sort of modeling relationship with a teacher, the major advantage to diversity within the teaching staff is being able to reach the maximum number of students, who will naturally not all identify with the same personality or lifestyle.

> I think some identify with me more than [with] other teachers, and some identify with the other teachers. Would I say that some aren't—yeah, I would say that there are some who aren't looking for role models, cause that's just the[ir] way. . . some people don't want to be influenced by anyone, don't want to be. . . They might find it in any case. . . I just think that's why you have a varied curriculum, because I'm not going to be a satisfactory role model to every student. Not everybody is looking for either that type of life, or my personality, or whatever it is.

But students say that much of the searching for lifestyle options went far beyond any model that the school would have presented, or approved. Despite all of the religious diversity that the school encouraged, or perhaps because of it, the real exploring surpassed the boundaries of acceptable pluralism. According to Ainat:

> The high school age is an age of many searches. I don't think that many searched specifically in the religious realm. Many searched outside. Searched beyond the religious model. Many girls tested boundaries. What is permitted, what is prohibited, what do I think is permitted, what do I think is prohibited. Where does the *halakhah* limit me and where do I decide that I am going to set limits to the *halakhah*. So the school tried, indeed, to present all sorts of models, but the searches were not limited only to that area . . . There was one [student] who suddenly turned into some sort of pious Breslaver. And another one, a Chabadnik. And most of the girls searched for

[24] He is not the only male subject-teacher. For a definition of *mehankhim* and their role within Pelech, see above, note 19.

> something that was not religious. Many girls searched—tested the boundaries of the typical world. A way of life that was not religious or not necessarily committed to Orthodox *halakhah*.

And how did the school respond to this? I asked. "They turned their nose and kind of averted their eyes."

The implicit assumption behind this study—and, indeed, behind the responses of all the students I interviewed, whether or not they pointed to role models as central to their personal development—was that adolescents communicate and develop relationships with adults. Sociologists have noted that this assumption would not have been accurate for generations prior to the early or mid-twentieth century, when adolescents, as well as children, were expected to be "seen but not heard."[25] In fact, even Pelech teachers, most of whom grew up within twenty years of their current students, perceive a distinction between the way their students relate to adult teachers and the way they themselves did.

Devorah, who has been a ***mehanekhet*** of either eleventh or twelfth grade throughout the five years that she has taught at Pelech, perceives her sixteen and seventeen-year-old students to be on an almost-desperate quest for guidance and modeling, a need which was foreign to her as a Pelech student of the same age.

> It's a wonderful age. . . It's really very special, the end of adolescence. . . going out into life. They are also at a crossroads. In twelfth grade they really ask. . . this year, many times they said to me, "Give us models for life." It's funny, because it's phrased as "models," and you know that if you do that, at the end of the lecture they'll be annoyed with you. . . But seriously, they say, "What do you expect of us now that we are entering life? How do you want us to be?" They ask me for direction, they ask me for guidance.

She recounted a class trip to visit alumnae in the army, after which girls approached the principal begging for guidance in coming to terms with the challenges of army

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[25] See Gisela Konopka, *Young Girls: A Portrait of Adolescence* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1976):56–57 and the rest of the chapter on "Adults." Konopka even cites a distinction in adolescent girls' relationship to adults in the sociological studies she conducted in the 1960s versus those she conducted in the 1970s.

life. Their response was striking in contrast to Devorah's own experience as a Pelech graduate entering the world.

> Even if [I would have felt that way], it didn't cross my mind that someone was supposed to give me that. Meaning, the assumption was that you are making your way in the world, and what I learned, I learned. Whereas, with them, the assumption is that teachers are capable of giving them that, teachers are. . . Do you understand? There is something new here, it is something in the generation. . .
>
> There was a note that a girl wrote me two years ago. She said to me, "[D], I learned much from you as a teacher, even more as a *mehanekhet*, and the most as a person." Okay, it's lovely, it's lovely, it's a really nice way to express thanks, but it says that she is conscious of these distinctions. These are things that I didn't know how to say.

Elisheva, another teacher who is also a Pelech graduate, concurred:

> I think that also, to a certain extent, the girls who are with us [at Pelech] today have more nerve than we did. I never considered visiting a teacher, or calling her on the phone. I didn't have that nerve, at all. Meaning, even though I learned in Pelech, the teachers were much farther from reach. Even though they were amazing, and even though they were—wonderful people. Today there is more nerve. Girls call me, girls call me on Friday at three-thirty and ask to come for *Shabbat*, they don't have any problem with that. On *Rosh Ha-Shannah* I receive tens of letters, and knocks on the door. I would never in my life dare to write to my teacher. In my life. . .
>
> I think that they are people who are a lot freer with themselves. In general. It is expressed, in my opinion, in many ways. Also in the religious sense. These are girls who know how to dance, and dare to go to discotheques, something that we never in our lives considered. These are girls who have relationships with boys, and the whole issue of touching, or not touching, bothers them a lot less than it bothered us as religious girls. Their ability to say what they think in class, in front of the teacher, is full of freedom. I never in my life criticized a teacher, in front of her. Never. (*Do you think this is something which characterizes the girls at Pelech?*) I think it affects everyone, but it gets expressed at Pelech as well.

The Agent of Personal Identification

Although Pelech teachers are aware of differences between their own generation and that of their students, they insist it is not coincidental that so many of them are alumnae. One teacher estimated that out of seven female *mehankhot* in the

school, six are Pelech graduates. When asked if she considered herself a good role model for her students, Ayalah's answer was, "Yes. Very. Absolutely."

> Because I am a Pelech graduate, and also because of my family, things that I dealt with. . . Yes, I am like them. That is to say, like them given the gap of time, which I do think is significant. . . I am very relevant. Still. It could be that in another ten years, I won't be relevant, but I, absolutely—yes.

Leah, who taught *gemara* and *halakhah* at Pelech for nine years before moving to a *midrashah*, was hired as a young alumna towards the end of Alice Shalvi's tenure as principal of Pelech.[26] When I asked her if there was significance to the fact that she was a Pelech graduate and whether it had any impact on her ability to relate to Pelech students, she said:

> Look. It was important to Professor Shalvi on two planes, and I think she was very smart in that. The first plane was that I, as a student, really, really enjoyed caring, sensitive, warm teachers. That was the atmosphere in the school. And it was a much smaller school. I absorbed it, I enjoyed it, I valued it very, very much, and it was clear, I think, to Professor Shalvi—and, by the way, it was that way with all the alumnae that she brought [back], that they received so much of it that it was clear that they would give it also. And it really went that way. The second thing she brought me for was that she sensed that the religious side of the school was not strong. I, as a student, was very critical of that, I had a very difficult time with that. And she knew, and that is also the wonderful thing about the relationship between us, that I don't accept the way of the school, I want to change things. And she brought me for that [purpose]. As an alumna. Meaning, as one who did not agree with certain things that existed, as a student, and wanted to change them. And now, she finished a B.A., she grew up, she matured, she has more tools. And that was always important at Pelech.

Shira Breuer, who took over from Shalvi as principal of Pelech in 1990, has continued her predecessor's policy of hiring graduates.

> First of all, I don't think there is anything that causes the principal of a school to feel more pride than when her graduates teach in the same institution. It says that there is—it's like your children continue in the

[26] Shalvi, who served as principal of Pelech from 1975 to 1990, was the guiding light behind much of the educational policy that Pelech pioneered and continues to represent today. She retired in 1990 amidst controversy over her unconventional--and, to a large part of the parent and faculty bodies, unacceptable—political activities, including dialogue with Palestinian groups, to which she devoted much of her energies and in which she involved Pelech students. See Shalvi, "Women's Wisdom."

> same path. What can make a parent happier than that thought? Everything that you believe, here they are, turning it into reality. It doesn't happen, usually, between parents and children.

She told me that students are very aware of their teachers' standing as alumnae and that that fact alone is cause for student-teacher identification. Indeed, class pictures going back quite a number of years hang in the hallway outside the principal's office, inviting current students to compare themselves with previous generations. (I couldn't help staring too, as I waited outside Shira's office for the interview we had scheduled.) So when I asked her whether hiring Pelech graduates has a positive impact upon students, she was unequivocal:

> I'm positive [it] does. It's a type of role model. The girls in twelfth grade now say to me, "It interests us, which of us will come back here to be a *mehanekhet*." You see the role modeling. You don't need to research it. They see their *mehankhot* and they say, "Wait a minute, will I also be—which of us will that be?" They [say it] to one another, I think. And they look around, and they check: who matches, who is this one, who is that one. They ask me, "The *mehankhot* who are now *mehankhot* at Pelech, did you know that they would be *mehankhot*? That they would go into teaching?" About some I say yes, about some I say, "I really can't say that." And there are some for whom it was clear to me that [they would] not. So—you don't know what will happen.

Nearly all of the Pelech teachers, alumnae or not, argue that their strength as educators lies in their close, personal connections with students. The young teachers, who make up the majority of the faculty, argue that proximity in age and in life experience is a significant agent of identification. Yoni, who maintains that his teachers in *yeshivat hesder* were icons rather than role models, is emphatic that to be a role model, one needs to present a vision that is attainable.

> I believe that a model for imitation is a person who is above you, so that you have something to aspire [to], but who is in a place that you are able to reach. I, for example—my students really connect to the fact that I was in Bnei Akiva, and that I was—for some of them, I was even their counselors' counselor. They see me on the eve of *Yom Ha-Zikaron* . . . they will see me at the Bnei Akiva [ceremony], together with friends in my *shevet*, because I have friends [from Bnei Akiva]

> who were killed. This says to them, "Hey, he did the same course as us. And here is where he is today. So maybe this is a course that we can also choose." This is basically the meaning of a model for imitation. That you demonstrate a course that is possible, that is legitimate, that is reasonable.

Many of the female teachers claim that gender is a significant factor in that equation. Arguing on behalf of female *mehankhot* (though not in favor of exclusively female subject-teachers), Elisheva said:

> On a personal level, I think that it is truly best for the girls to have a [female] *mehanekhet*. It is better for them to have a *mehanekhet* because, truly, I present myself to them as an older sister. Not as a teacher. Meaning, I am the person who did the same things that they did, a total of ten years ago, now it's already a little more, but when I started, it was seven years. . . I made the same mistakes, I did the same silly things. I had the same fears, and therefore, today, I can help them more. Meaning, I understand them. It's not—there is no division of "us" and "them." It's "us."

Students seem to agree that when they do look for role models and religious figures, they are looking for people with whom they can connect personally, and not for famous, unreachable personalities. The opportunity for talking and discussion features prominently in their descriptions of ideal religious models. As Avital projected:

> I think that I could see, let's say, in [Professor] Avi Ravitsky, or in Rav [Yehudah] Amital, religious figures whom I do very much identify with, and I don't have this literal closeness to them. But again, on the other hand, if I had a question, if I had some sort of true religious dilemma, I would go to people who are close to me, because it would be easier for me to talk about it.

Personal relationships are viewed as such an integral part of the Pelech curriculum that teachers who don't succeed in forming intense bonds with their students often feel a sense of failure. Leora, who was never a *mehanekhet*, claims that the schedule is designed to limit the roles of subject teachers, without distinction between those who teach religious studies and those who teach secular subjects.

> I had a student my first year call me up at the end of the year and say, "Hi [L], this is Maayan, do you remember me? You know who this is? Maayan. . ." And I was flabbergasted. I couldn't believe it. First of all, I had learned their names the first day of school, she had been in my class all year, I assumed it was somebody I had some minimal connection with, and she was surprised that I actually knew who she was when she was calling me out of context.

She proposed that as a means of maximizing religious role modeling, *limmudei kodesh* teachers should be given either more teaching hours, or a more integral role in the educational framework.

Not all subject teachers, however, have had the same experience, suggesting that the bonds which are formed are largely a result of individual initiative. Leah, who was a *mehanekhet* for five years, maintains that some of the closest relationships she developed with students were, in fact, during her years as *gemara* subject-teacher. In response to my asking about limitations on her interaction with students when she stopped being a *mehanekhet*, she said:

> I didn't feel that. The opposite, even. Look, I also had opportunities a lot of the time, in the classes, to create a connection. For example, I was very strict about *chevrutot*. So I used to walk around, among [the students learning]. And you see someone who—till she takes out her *gemara* today, and till she . . So you ask her, "Tell me, what's going on? You're not in the mood today?" And she says, "No. . ." [You say] "Come, come a minute to the side," and—you understand?
>
> There were a lot of times they used to call me at home with all sorts of questions, [some having to do] with learning, but also others. Mainly, what was created—I don't want to take pride, but there was an expression at Pelech, "*Ha-Moadon shel* [*L*]." Because *gemara* class was like a club. One day, it was a terribly cold, cold winter day, and we had a class at two. And I was at home. I prepared a big pot of soup, and I said, "Let's go, I'll bring it to them" . . . Things like that. I played a lot with the hours. But really, it wasn't [anything] brilliant. Because they were amazing girls, smart, very communicative, pleasant. And *the* proof is that I have a very strong connection with many, many alumnae. They come here for my classes, they come simply to talk to me, they don't get married without showing me their fiancés, and. . . No, not all of them, of course (*laughs*).

With all of the personal elements that teachers at Pelech claim to invest in their teaching, some students are nonetheless disappointed with the outcome. Shlomit, a quiet, serious 22-year-old, had particularly harsh words:

> At Pelech there was never any guidance towards, "It is important to be a religious woman," or "This is what we do, this is how you do it." We learned a lot of things but never the personal aspect of where do we take that? What do we do? . . . In any *halakhah* class or *mahshavah* class you learn the *mekorot*—but then there's the next step of where do we take that, what do we do with it, is this part of our life—and that never happened.

I pressed Shlomit a bit to give me some examples of where she thought that an opportunity was lost, where a teacher could have taken it to "the next step" but didn't.

> Well, the *mehanekhet* has an hour a week of *hinukh*, and that never had to do with anything religious.[27] It could have been an opportunity to share something personal. The twelfth grade "*Eyshet Hayil*" class had the potential to be a discussion of what do we, as religious women, do.[28] Instead, we discussed relationships, but it never had anything to do with *halakhah*. We did have discussions about the army, *midrashah*, but it never got down to specifics—what do I do if I'm on a base for Shabbat and I'm the only religious person?

I could hear the hurt in her voice as she told me,

> I never found it outside of Pelech either. And I think it's the role of the high school to provide that. High school is when we choose where we're going, who we are. I don't know what it's like in other schools, and I don't know if there is a correlation with how many girls stay religious. But I think it could only help. Maybe that's why so many girls feel the need to go to *midrashot* for necessary *hizuk* before the army, or without that, they would get lost.

Contending With Complex Messages

Everyone at Pelech, from the principal on down, concurs that Pelech is not only a school for the intellectually elite, but for the religiously elite as well. Girls from strong, religious families are more likely to "do well" at Pelech because the school's complex religious messages and range of religious options serve to enrich

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[27] The reference here is to the weekly *sha'at hinukh*, "education hour," run by *mehankhot* for their "home-room" classes. For a fuller explanation, see above, note 19.

[28] The "*Eyshet Hayil* class," required of all twelfth-graders at Pelech, is the forum in which students are prepared for marriage and family life and other aspects of their future roles as adult women.

rather than to challenge. Girls with weaker religious backgrounds often come out confused and lacking religious direction. "I have something at home, so I followed that," said Shlomit. "People who don't have something at home pretty much get lost." Though she is less critical, Avital agreed that the school is most successful with girls who have additional sources of religious support:

> It's not only the school which educates, it's also the home. It could be that I had certain answers which I received at home, so in school, there was one sort of need, and the school was able to answer that need for me. And someone else will say, "I was missing that at home, and the school did not provide me with enough answers." But I, given everything, did feel that the school did a good job.

Shira Breuer did not disagree:

> I think that the Pelech School is appropriate for girls who come from families that are very—for whom the religious path is very clear at home, and where the religious fervor in the home is also genuine. Meaning, the family lives an unambiguous religious life. And when there are girls here who come from families [where] that is not exactly the situation, then it is clear that there is some kind of—that there could be tremendous confusion. Because, on the one hand, the home is not exactly like the school, there are some aspects that you can find in the home, but there are some aspects that [you] cannot. So the confusion is great, and time is required for the girl to go afterwards and get straightened out. And it would be true, if she learned in a school that was entirely simplistic in the religious aspect, it could be that there she would be in such great conflict that she would decide one way or the other. Here the clash is not so frontal, rather, it's confusing. So the girl needs to know, "Okay, between my family and what I learned in school, both in the religious arena and the general arena, where am I going to go now to find myself?"

Several teachers emphasized that their function as a role model is to broadcast a distinct, coherent message. Occasionally, this requires being judgmental, or saying no. Ayalah, who told me that she feels particularly uncomfortable with students who focus too much on her own opinions and turn her into a guru, nonetheless stressed:

> I am very strict about always saying what I think. In every discussion, and on every thing, even with things that don't need to be decided. Meaning, not only with halakhic questions, but with exegetical questions [as well]. We're reading a chapter, I suggest something, a student suggests something else. If she convinces me, I say, "I agree

> with you," and if she's not convincing, I say, "That's fine. There is room to say that, [but] I don't think that way." I am fairly opinionated, I think . . . I feel that there is room for them to say, and to create, and to feel, and to experience what they want, but if they ask me what I do, I do one thing, I don't do three things.

Indoctrination in feminism is one thing students don't miss at Pelech. Whether it's at career workshops, school-wide debates regarding women and *kriat Ha-Torah*, or the twelfth-grade *Eyshet Hayil* class on relationships and family life, feminism, say students, is always in the background. One alumna remembered hearing the concept explained at the very first welcome session for prospective students, when she visited the school in eighth grade. By the time she graduated, she said, she was a bit "allergic" to the whole topic. Avital agreed that the school may have been too heavy-handed in pushing the agenda with high school students, though she is happy for the indoctrination, in retrospect:

> I think that at Pelech, in a certain respect, you get it a little too much—"the woman who has to go out to the world"—at least, that's the way I felt. Afterwards, I needed to take a break from it, a bit—meaning, from the engagement with feminism and the advancement of women, *davka* religious women—I had to take a break from it. But now I absolutely find that I am returning to it. There is also some issue of maturity involved. That is to say, when you are in high school, whatever they try—because you are a teenager, so whatever they put into you, you get a little. . . But today, when I look at it with slightly more mature eyes, I definitely look at Pelech as an ideal. From my perspective, I am very proud that I learned in this school, I see in it, truly, a very correct combination of things.

Orit told me that the feminism message never spoke to her:

> I was very chauvinistic and the school was very feminist for me. They painted an ideal woman, but for me, it was not actually the ideal.

However, when I asked her to depict her own ideal woman, the image she described is hard to distinguish from the ideal that Shira Breuer sketched, or from the ideal that many of the Pelech teachers seem to embody.

> A woman who combines religious life and belief, family life and career. Who does not give up on her personal dreams for the sake of

her husband, children, or even religion. I truly believe that it's possible to combine them.

Test Case: The Debate Over a Rav Beit Sefer

Particularly telling, both in terms of what the students are looking for and what the school intends to provide in the way of religious role models, is the ongoing debate about a *Rav Beit Sefer*. Unlike most national-religious schools in Israel, Pelech has never had an official in-house rabbi.[29] In fact, most of the male religious studies teachers at Pelech are *yeshivah* graduates, but not rabbis, and even those who have received ordination do not use their rabbinical titles in the school context. Many of the teachers, both men and women, are learned and knowledgeable in *halakhah*, and if a halakhic question ever arose, they would look at the sources, have a discussion, and somehow arrive at a conclusion.

Several years ago, as Shira Breuer tells it, students began asking her to hire a school rabbi. In her estimation, the request was motivated primarily by a psychological or sociological desire to be like other religious schools, which had rabbis, and she was not particularly disposed to honor it. ("Their friends had a *Rav Beit Sefer*, and it's like some sort of [defining] characteristic of the school, if there is a *Rav* or there isn't a *Rav*.") She does concede that some of the students expressed a true, religious desire to interact with a rabbi and to have him answer questions. But to her mind, any number of the teachers currently employed by the school could have

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[29] In a recent publication, the board of the Israeli religious school system defined the *Rav Beit Sefer* as "a figure . . . intended to serve as a model for students and teachers in the school, on the part of the school administration. More than any other educator in the school, the *Rav* will represent the Torah and the Torah's ways. . ." (translation mine). The *Rav*'s job description includes the responsibilities of functioning as an exemplar of positive character traits; as a *talmid hakham*; as a counselor; as an educational leader; as an involved participant in the larger community; as an administrator; and as a bridge between various factions, including students, teachers, parents, and community members. This description of the *Rav Beit Sefer*'s role is based on the recommendations of the recently-convened Sperber Commission, which strongly encouraged all religious schools to employ an individual, certified by the *Minhal Ha-Hinukh Ha-Dati*, to fill this position. See "*Rav Beit Ha-Sefer*: Directives for the 5753 School Year," *Hozer Minhal Ha-Hinukh Ha-Dati* 5 (Nissan 5762): 16–17.

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served as *Rav*, with regard to answering students' questions, and she didn't see the need to bestow titles or to define any one of them as such.

Orit, who felt that a *Rav Beit Sefer* was sorely lacking, raised the topic a number of times while still a student at Pelech but graduated before the issue was resolved. Now, with perspective, she reflects that from her standpoint as a student, there was a dual concern: the desire for an authoritative source of halakhic opinion and the desire for *halakhah* to attain more presence and centrality within the institution.

> I always had someone to talk to. . . In the end, I asked teachers. [My teacher] Hannah was a halakhic source, maybe even like a *rav*. But in general, to ask teachers is not authoritative enough, they haven't learned enough . . . I would like to see *halakhah* occupy more space in the school. Therefore [because it didn't], until today, there are things that I don't know.

Did it seem to you, at any point, that what the girls were looking for was not a halakhic authority, but a spiritual authority? I asked Shira. A recognized, authoritative figure who would be able to guide them in matters of religious identity? Well, Shira, said,

> There are two things here. They wanted to be like other schools, and to define for themselves the type of school that they are, and therefore they wanted it. And they wanted, yes, someone with authority who is called "*Rav*" in order to answer questions. Now, I have no doubt that what they also wanted, perhaps without being aware of it, is that there would be a person of spirituality here, of religion, who would also direct them, finally, and take them out of the murk of adolescence and all of their issues of religious complexity. Someone that they could admire. . . . Yes, with big eyes, who will speak to them, they will all follow visions. . . There is an internal desire of children in adolescence to have someone whom they can admire. Who will take them out of the unbearable confusion that they are in. So—okay. You can argue whether it's good, or it's not good, but I didn't have such a person available. . . .

But do you recognize that need? I pushed. The need for an individual to serve as a religious model?

> I'm telling you, *that* I did look for. I looked to have, as teachers—that there would be figures here. Every teacher that I take, I want each one of them to be a figure, whether it's a man or whether it's a woman. I look for those figures. Some sort of religious charisma, some sort of ability to—do you understand? That absolutely speaks to me, and I look for it in every teacher that I take. But in my eyes, that's not a *Rav Beit Sefer*. In my eyes, a *Rav Beit Sefer* is someone who can answer questions, and then I don't need a *Rav Beit Sefer*. The technical function which is called a *Rav Beit Sefer* doesn't interest me. The figure of a religious leader, of a spiritual leader, is very important in my eyes. And if I had the ability to place a figure like that here, whether they called him *Rav* or not, really doesn't interest me. The main thing is that the personality will shine. I want that very much. . . .
>
> They have some sort of fantastic idea about a *Rav Beit Sefer* who will come and lead them, and I also have that outlook. But they don't understand that the person they are dreaming about, and that I am dreaming about, won't come here, to the school, to teach them. Because it doesn't interest him, what can you do? A figure of the stature that we want is not interested in being a *Rav Beit Sefer*. There is simply no person of the stature that I would want to see, a spiritual figure to lead the school, who would come to be here. If only there was. . . . You understand, this fantasy of the girls', it's at the level of a fantasy. It is not given to realization.

However, said Shira, as principal of the school, she feels that students' needs and desires are to be taken seriously, so she began to ask various teachers if they would be willing to take on the role. When none of the male teachers agreed, she asked a female teacher, Leora, whom everyone in the school considered a *talmidat hakham*, to take on the role, and considered the issue resolved in a way that made everyone happy.

So what function does she actually serve? I asked. Is she the school's *posek*? Do the students approach her with halakhic questions? Does she serve as a religious role model? As a spiritual authority?

Well, mostly she is an address for the students' halakhic questions, Shira said, and Leora herself concurred. Due to time constraints and the limited number of hours that she spends in the school building, her function never actually expanded beyond holding office hours, writing a *halakhah* column in the student newspaper, and

occasionally being called in for damage control when an issue arose regarding *shemitah* or the school play. Ideally, said Shira, she would have liked to see Leora going into classrooms, addressing the students before holidays, speaking regularly to students about greater, meta-*halakhah* issues beyond topics covered in the classroom.[30]

After discussing it, the title they settled on was "*Morat Halakhah*," which aptly describes her job as an address for halakhic queries. "In my eyes," said Shira, "it signifies greatness in *halakhah*. Yes. A person that I can come to for advice on halakhic matters."

But what happened to the idea of a religious personality, a spiritual figure, a role model?

Leora herself does feel that the job puts her in a position to function as a role model for the girls in the school, although she has no way of judging her effect.

> I have a distinct feeling in Pelech that . . . the Judaic studies teachers are teachers just like their math teacher is a teacher. I don't get a feeling that there is necessarily—I mean, obviously, the content is religious and certain other issues will come up during the class. But I feel that they don't necessarily feel towards their Judaic studies teachers this reverence, or status, at least, as a halakhic person. Meaning, you might know how to read *RaShI* really well, and that's why you're teaching me *TaNaKh*. So I think it is important that there's somebody. . . Again, I might also be their *gemara* teacher, but for some of them, I think it is important that there is somebody in the school who is specifically a religious figure.

Do you mean a religious authority or a religious personality? I asked.

> I think both.
>
> I do think also, I think that there's a big phenomenon in the circles that they're from in Israel. . . . It sounds bizarre to say this, but there really is no place for a *rav* in their. . . even in their *Weltanschauung*, I would say. In their *hashkafat olam*, if you have a question, you think about it, or you decide whether it's appropriate for you. This idea of going to somebody and asking them. . . I think it's important for them in

[30] These are all functions typically performed by the *Rav Beit Sefer*.

> general to get a feeling that religion, or the halakhic system, is serious and that you can't always figure out everything on your own. . . . I think it's positive to have this idea that there are people out there who know a lot, who you respect as religious figures who might have something to say to you on particular subjects, beyond what you could work out for yourself. I think that's important.

Even in the liberal world of Pelech, placing a woman in a position of halakhic authority is breaking relatively new ground. *Does anyone ever question or comment on her ability to answer halakhic questions?* I inquired. Not the girls, said Leora.

> When girls would ask me questions, and I'd either say I would get back to them or answer them on spot, I didn't get reactions that were like, "Well, could you ask a *rav*?" They were totally accepting of my ability to answer the questions, which I thought was very interesting. On the other hand, it's possible that most of them come from families where there really isn't a *rav* in the picture. In other words, it isn't like they ask [halakhic] questions five times a week, and they're used to. . . So the person that they have in that position is their teacher in the school, meaning someone that they'd ask a question to. There's a reason that they're coming to me, not just because it's easier. . . It doesn't make it less interesting, though, that they didn't seem to think it was funny that they were asking me questions.[31]

When I asked Orit, who fought for an institutionalized halakhic authority but graduated before Leora became "*Morat Halakhah*," whether the gender of the authority would matter to her, she equivocated:

> It doesn't matter to me, a man or a woman, keeping in mind that in the Orthodox world today, there are no female rabbis. (*Upon further reflection*) The title is not important to me. You know, actually, I would be fine with a female "*rav*".

Although they don't doubt Leora's ability to answer religious questions, that does not mean that all students are satisfied with the *Morat Halakhah* position. "She makes it clear that she's not a rabbi and that she's not giving *piskei halakhah*," said Meira, a twelfth grader, who feels strongly that the school should have a *Rav*.

> I don't really know her personally, but even just from the halls, you can see how friendly she is, and I think that makes a difference, people

[31] In Israel, where synagogues with official rabbis are not the norm, regular contact between lay people and religious authority is of a limited nature. This, perhaps, underscores the significance of religious leadership on the part of teachers.

> feel more comfortable approaching her. . . . And I think that it's important that you can see how she is—pretty knowledgeable and experienced, you know, and I think that that's very special to see, for sure.

Nonetheless, she insisted, a *Morat Halakhah* does not obviate the need for a school *Rav*, which, as Shira anticipated, she argues is important for socio-religious reasons.

> They're the ones who we turn to. I think that you're educating to that when you have a rabbi who serves that purpose. Even if that rabbi is really bringing somebody else's thought, it's still—that's why I said, the school doesn't even necessarily have to have somebody in the school, because I realize what a problem that is. I see what a *Rav Beit Sefer* does in other schools, and I don't necessarily think it's positive. But to make it clear that you're working according to some *psak*, according to something. It's not—it's not anarchy. And it's not just anybody who learned a lot and knows a lot, there is—there's something about recognition by the community.
>
> There aren't *morot halakhah* out there, for you to turn to. So it's also in terms of. . . that's there's somebody to turn to, that's known as a rabbi, and a rabbi you can find in every congregation. I mean, you can't go into a *kehillah* and say, "Excuse me, who's your *morat halakhah*?" It's just not. . . Even if there's somebody knowledgeable enough to answer it, people won't know who to turn you to, who to tell you to ask. . . . It's not necessarily saying that someday it won't develop that way, but right now, it doesn't exist.

It is not entirely clear, from Shira's perspective either, just how intentional Leora's selection was and just what precedent the school intended to set.

> I was terribly happy. Yes, it was excellent. Yes, absolutely. It's also an unbelievable role model, for the girls, that there is a woman here who is a *talmidat hakhamim*, and that she is—of couse. It was entirely intentional. But I am not telling you that if I had—if, let's say [Benny Lau] was presented to me that same year and said, "I'm ready to be the *Rav Beit Sefer*," whether I would have taken [L] or him—a terribly difficult question. Very. I don't know. That is a very true question. You understand? Because it was wonderful for me that [L] was [the *Morat Halakhah*]. But if I had a parallel to [L]—I don't know. I don't know what I would have done. I don't want to know (*laughs*). A very tricky question, very tricky. Because it would express a lot of things in me. Very interesting. I never thought of that.
>
> The girls would want a man. I have no doubt of that. I have *no* doubt of that. For a lot of reasons. Reason one, regularity. They are very conservative, they are very. . . I have no doubt of that. Look, tradition is something terribly strong. For all of us. Tradition is the most

> valuable thing, that gives the most—that builds identity. We don't know how conservative we are, how hung up on what our parents did, how much we want to be the same way. The whole issue of rebellion—that is exactly the conflict at this age. . . .
>
> So they want, yes, they want a male rabbi, yes. That is entirely clear. Because that is what my grandfather had, and my mother, and my father, and me, also.

*

The overarching theme that emerged from all of my conversations with members of the Pelech community was students' self-expressed need for religious direction as the products of an educational system that does not hide complexity. Students and teachers alike probed the implications of exposing students to multiple voices of authority and stressed a need for balance between long-range educational goals and addressing students' immediate conflicts and concerns. Pelech emerged as school that has, rather than a dearth of role models, a confusing overabundance of religious figures whose broadcasted messages often conflict.

Recommendations and Conclusion

In this last, prescriptive section of my project, I hope, on the basis of the case study I have presented, to make recommendations as to how the structure of girls' high schools might be adjusted to place greater emphasis on religious role modeling and to achieve greater measures of success.

For schools that are looking to amplify the role modeling element of their educational programs or to intensify the impact of role modeling that they do provide, several components of Pelech's curriculum are worth reviewing. The dominant presence of Pelech graduates in the faculty room, the ongoing interaction between teachers and their students outside the classroom, and the *honkhut* program all serve to foster quality relationships between teachers and students which, in turn, increase the likelihood that students will (consciously or unconsciously) come to perceive their teachers as models for life.

Hiring Pelech graduates does not only increase the chances of teachers relating to their students, it also ups the likelihood of students viewing their teachers as people whom they themselves might become. This is important in terms of setting standards and goals as well as opening doors and legitimizing options. Assuming that students like and respect their teachers, it improves the chances of their considering careers in education, or, at the least, holding the educational profession in high regard.

After-hours interaction between teachers and students is not unique to Pelech, but it is a particularly emphasized, and anecdotally successful, element of the Pelech curriculum. The effectiveness of values-based education, which by definition includes all religious education, is significantly enhanced by the formation of relationships between teacher and students that extend beyond the classroom. In her home, or on school *shabbatonim*, the teacher has the opportunity to supply images to

go along with the words of all her classroom lectures and, thereby, to concretize messages she may have alluded to in the abstract. Students who interact with teachers outside of the classroom are, in many cases, likely to continue the relationship beyond the duration of the classroom or school affiliation, which intensifies and increases the possibility for role modeling.

Pelech's *honkhut* program, in which every student is paired, on a yearly basis, with a faculty member of her choice, is a noteworthy mentoring program. Faculty mentors meet with students on an individual, monthly basis to discuss issues relevant to the student and her academic progress or personal interests. Additionally, *honkhot* represent their students at bi-annual "reviews," meetings between faculty and administration at which the progress of each student in the school is monitored. They then report back to the students, thereby serving as a link between students and the school administration. Although not all students found the experience to be necessary or relevant, teachers note that the requisite, personal meetings between students and members of the faculty have, in numerous instances, served to detect serious issues that might otherwise have been overlooked and, additionally, to prevent quieter, less assertive students from falling between the cracks. Those students who did find the program to be successful—including students who developed positive, meaningful relationships with other faculty members outside of the *honkhut* program—asserted that the mentoring was an opportunity for serious conversation, for self-exploration, and, simply, for being heard.

For Pelech itself, as well as for other schools similarly committed to educating students towards religious pluralism, it is worthwhile to consider incorporating a dominant religious, or spiritual, authority figure within the school hierarchy. The classic *Rav Beit Sefer* model is not necessarily appropriate for Pelech or for other

comparable institutions; however, recognition of religious authority is an important component of identity formation, particularly for adolescents struggling to find direction within a complex religious world. Possibilities need not be limited to a man with rabbinic ordination, or even to a recognized halakhic authority without ordination. An alternative model that might actually satisfy students' needs for direction, legitimization, and role modeling more effectively is a *Mashgiah Ruhani* or a *Mashpia*-type figure. In girls' schools, a dominant, charismatic female religious figure could be particularly instrumental in providing students with an accessible, yet authoritative, religious model that would serve to answer both their current needs for guidance as well as future searches for positive models of female religious achievement.

One of my goals in pursuing this project was to raise awareness of the significance of role modeling to adolescent religious development. In order to effectively raise awareness of the issue among the population in the best position to make a difference, seminars on mentoring strategies and the educational value of role modeling for high school students should be offered by schools as part of ongoing teacher training. If the importance of religious role modeling succeeds in becoming part of the contemporary educational discourse, a small measure of success will have already been achieved.

Afterword

Few projects end up accomplishing all of the goals they set out to achieve, and this paper has been no exception. Embarking on this project, I wanted to determine the awareness of role modeling education in the greater Orthodox world, to draw comparisons between the educational experiences of adolescent boys and adolescent girls, to learn lessons from the educational strategies of the *haredi* sector, to identify visions of educational success. In the end, I have achieved none of those lofty aims.

What I have created is a portrait of one institution in which role modeling is a recognized and recognizable element of the educational program, in the hope of inspiring both myself and others to continue researching ways in which role modeling might be made an even more common and effective component of religious education.

In the course of my work, many questions were raised and few were answered. Among those that I was not able to address in the context of this project was: how do high school students define religiosity? Is their definition of religion and/or spirituality in consonance with the definition of their teachers? This issue would certainly have an impact on the ability and probability of students forming relationships with religious mentors.

I do not feel that I have satisfactorily answered one of the major questions with which I started, that being whether gender is critical to the success of religious role modeling. Pelech students took for granted the availability of female models of religiosity and had been presented with a feminist ideal but not an exclusively male ideal, such that gender did not seem to be a burning conflict for them in the realm of religious identity formation. This is an issue that warrants further examination.

I thank Shira Breuer, Pelech's principal, for pointing out one methodological weakness of my study; unfortunately this occurred after it was already too late to correct. It was an oversight on my part not to have interviewed Pelech graduates who identify themselves as non-religious. These interviews would have added a significant and potentially distinct perspective, and I can only hope that their absence did not entirely alter the overall picture that I have presented.

An additional issue that was touched upon in this project but is certainly worthy of further investigation is where and how those students who claimed to be uninterested and unaffected by role modeling engaged in the construction of religious identity. How were their religious personalities developed? What was their source of religious inspiration?

I hope that these and all other questions that may have been triggered or inspired by this project will serve as a springboard for yet deeper study and examination.

APPENDIX

Teachers as Religious Authorities*

As the old joke goes, a geometry teacher is not expected to be a square in her personal life, whereas a religious studies teacher is most definitely expected to be a religious person. Beyond espousing a religious lifestyle, however, many *limmudei kodesh* teachers function as religious authorities, individuals with whom students consult on issues ranging from life-style decisions to choosing courses at university. The coupling of these two roles—teacher and religious authority—is not compulsory: great teachers are not necessarily religious authorities, certainly not in the sense of *poskim*, and acclaimed religious authorities are not necessarily successful as teachers.

Is it the role of a *limmudei kodesh* teacher to serve as a religious authority for his/her students, in addition to teaching religious texts and espousing a religious lifestyle? Are *limmudei kodesh* teachers—with or without *semikhah*—equipped to serve in this capacity? Do teachers feel comfortable with this role? Is there a difference in the way that male and female teachers perceive their function as religious authorities for their students? Do we want students to look to their teachers for religious authorization?

Girls in Israeli high schools and *midrashot* are the student population on which this essay is focused, and their teachers, men and women, are the target educator

* This piece was originally written as a self-standing essay in the context of ATID. I have chosen to include it as an appendix to this project because, although it does not relate to Pelech students, who were the subjects of my larger study, it explores a topic that is related to the issue of religious role modeling. This essay was written in March 2002, on the basis of interviews with **Malka Peutrekovski**, *Rosh Beit Midrash* at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem; **Michelle Farber**, teacher of Talmud and *halakhah* at the Pelech School for girls in Jerusalem; and **Yafit Clymer**, teacher of *TaNaKh* at Midreshet Lindenbaum. Many of the observations and theories presented in the essay may be credited to them, although they are not explicitly attributed. Many thanks. Thank you also to the Israeli and American students at Midreshet Lindenbaum and other *midrashot*, and to the graduates of the Pelech School, who agreed to be interviewed as background for this essay.

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population. Male students often identify their teachers—*rabbanim* and *rashei yeshivah*—as religious authorities with whom they consult (either in theory or in practice) on a range of halakhic and *hashkafic* issues. When (in the course of interviewing students about their relationships with teachers in high school and beyond) I asked female students to identify religious figures in their lives, very few interviewees pointed to teachers, male or female. What does this gendered observation add to the discussion of teachers and religious authority?

This essay will raise many questions and will not provide nearly as many answers; however, in the course of this essay, I would like to: (1) define the teacher's potential function as a religious authority; (2) examine two or three ways in which he or she might function in this capacity; and (3) analyze the societal implications of teachers taking on this additional role.

A religious authority is not the same as a religious counselor, although it is reasonable to assume that an individual's capacity to serve as a religious authority will make him or her that much more capable to function as a religious counselor and vice versa. A religious counselor—what we call a *mashgiah ruhani*—is someone able to offer advice on spiritual matters, an individual skilled in general emotional and psychological counseling and well-versed in theology to the extent of being able to offer religious guidance. A religious authority—what we usually term a *rav* or a *posek*—is someone knowledgeable in religious law, an individual who is in command of the minutiae of *halakhah* and thereby qualified to offer religious rulings.

Many *limmudei kodesh* teachers are, in fact, certified religious authorities in that sense. In the United States and in Israel, albeit to a lesser degree, men commonly pursue a rabbinic degree as preparation for becoming *mekhanhim*. This continues to be the case even as graduate programs in Jewish education flourish and even as it

becomes acceptable to study in *yeshivah* without pursuing *semikhah*. Apparently, it is assumed that the stamp of religious authority confers upon an individual influence, or recognition, or knowledge that is desirable in a teacher of religious studies.

The institution in which an individual teaches can significantly impact his or her effectiveness as a religious authority for students. A school that confers the title "*Rav*" on all of its male teachers, regardless of whether they have received *semikhah*, effectively broadcasts to its students that these men are to be treated as religious authorities. A school that does not allow women to teach *halakhah* announces, in effect, that women do not function as religious authorities. A school that appoints a specific teacher as "*Rav Beit Sefer*" or "*Morat Halakhah*" sends the message that teachers can and should be perceived as religious authorities; however, if the school fails to consult that authority on matters of halakhic policy—or consults the authority and subsequently disregards his or her ruling—the school is also sending a potent message to students about relationship to religious authority.

But what actually determines when and whether teachers will be perceived by their students as religious authorities, i.e. as addresses for questions of a halakhic nature? An informal survey of female students at a variety of *midrashot* suggests that teachers are perceived as religious authorities largely on the basis of the subject matter they teach. A teacher of *halakhah*, male or female, with or without the title "*Rav*," will more likely field halakhic questions than a teacher of *TaNaKh*. Students will perceive *mahshevet Yisrael* teachers as religious role models, perhaps, but not as religious authorities. If this impression is true, then the school's decision as to whom to send into the classroom to teach *halakhah* is much more significant. If educators without *semikhah* are teaching *halakhah*, students may get used to addressing halakhic queries to a lay audience. If no women are sent into the *halakhah* classroom,

students may subconsciously close off the possibility of consulting qualified women on matters of *halakhah*.

What this finding also suggests is that teachers function as religious authorities on the basis of their perceived knowledge. Students who are aware that the title "*Rav*" is not the exclusive marker of religious knowledge say that lack of title or of official certification does not deter them from perceiving female teachers (or male teachers without *semikhah*) as religious authorities. The measuring rod seems to be the students' own assessment of a teacher's religious knowledge—as one student put it, "if she knows more Torah than me." Students cite *shiurim* in *halakhah* that are presented by knowledgeable female teachers and claim that these presentations of *halakhah* carry as much weight as parallel presentations by teachers who are *rabbanim*. But what about students in schools where women are not allowed to teach *halakhah* or to present halakhic issues? Under what circumstances do these students perceive their female teachers as religious authorities? What distinctions do they draw between the women who teach them religious studies and the men who do?

Teachers who want to function as religious authorities, or at least want to see other teachers functioning as such, feel pressure to be religiously knowledgeable and to convey their religious knowledge to their students. One teacher, observing that girls in her high school were frustrated by the lack of religious authorities with whom they could connect, speculated that female teachers were dismissed as potential authorities because students felt they did not possess the requisite knowledge:

> Just knowledge without wisdom is not going to do it, but . . . There are many female teachers in [name of school] who are smart women, and who are lovely women, and nonetheless there was not that leap [on the part of students] to connect with them... and if yes, then the girls would be disappointed with the answers . . . I think... at the moment they feel that she [the teacher] has knowledge, first of all, it causes respect towards her, as a teacher, and also maybe a little bit of pride, as

if "she did it, she made it" and this fosters the openness to ask the questions, with the assumption that she will have the answers.

Many *limmudei kodesh* teachers, particularly women, are uncomfortable with the idea of serving as religious authorities because of the power or influence over the lives of their students that such a role implies. One teacher expressed her hesitation after observing how attentively her students listen to her statements:

> I see this mainly because we are very aware of this and the thing we are grappling with is how not to create what is created in many other *midrashot*, an atmosphere of adoration and worship and a dogmatic following after a particular person . . . we are very aware of our power. And there are certain things that we decide consciously we are going to be missionaries for, without embarrassment I say this: the subject of *halakhah* and of halakhic observance, a spiritual world, involvement in the life of the Jewish people. There are other things that I am much more careful of, specifically because I see how the girls look at us . . . They say to us, every time we have a panel, "We want to hear what you have to say, we aren't responsible enough to decide, to think." I know that every sentence I say, they remind me of it afterwards.

In the current discussion within the modern Orthodox world of rabbinic authority versus personal autonomy, teachers' roles as religious authorities should be raised as a central question. Many lay people come into contact with religious authority in the guise of a synagogue rabbi or a *rav kehilati*, but as the lay population becomes more religiously educated and thus more religiously independent, many do not (or if they do, the contact is of an extremely limited nature). All students come into direct contact with teachers over the course of their school career. Thus, high school classrooms are particularly fertile ground for establishing relationships between the lay population and religious authority, and the high school years may, in fact, be a critical juncture for laying this groundwork. All of which speaks in favor of teachers functioning as religious authorities.

For girls and women, the issue of relationship to religious authority is particularly acute. Women, who do not enter the world of the *yeshivah*, have little

opportunity to come in direct contact with religious authority other than that which enters the high school or *midrashah* classroom in the guise of teacher.[32] As a result, women who are the product of these high schools and *midrashot* often have a poor relationship with the concept of halakhic authority as well. If girls in high schools and *midrashot* perceived their teachers as religious authorities, it is possible that this lack could be compensated.

[32] In this instance, the *midrashot*, which are generally not associated with halakhic authorities of stature, are not an adequate substitute.

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